

Why is Marguerite Bourgeoys a Saint?

Homily

Loyola Chapel

October 31, 1982

Today, on the Canonization of Marguerite Bourgeoys, it seems appropriate to reflect upon the question: Why is Marguerite Bourgeoys a Saint?

We have all heard about the miracles she performed after her death, and about the 2,600 sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame who teach in schools in Canada, the United States, Honduras, Japan, Cameroun, Guatemala, and France.

And yet, at this historic moment we feel a deep desire to enter inside the heart and mind of this woman who lived in Montreal over three hundred years ago. For sanctity surely works itself out in that sacred place where Christ comes to dwell in the centre of the soul.

In a mysterious way, we can try to interpret Marguerite Bourgeoys' movement to sanctity by considering some of the writings she has left for us. These statements are preserved as a window to her soul; they show the interweaving of a human personality and the life-giving presence of Christ.

We can imagine St. Marguerite joining in the responsorial song for today's mass: "Praised be the God who saves me He has shown His love for His anointed." (Ps. 17)

Marguerite Bourgeoys began her life in 1620 in Troyes, France. She was orphaned at the age of 19 and soon sought entrance into the contemplative order of Carmelites. Her rejection by this order must have been a shock.

We know that she next met Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve at the home of his sister. When Marguerite heard that de Maisonneuve needed a person to teach at Ville Marie, but that he could not take nuns, she said "I offered to go and he accepted me; but I would have to go alone."

Worried about the propriety of travelling as a woman alone with a body of men, she prayed for guidance. Marguerite then shared the following mystical illumination:

One morning, when I was fully awake, a tall woman dressed in a robe of white serge, said to me very clearly: "Go, I will never forsake you." I knew that it was the Blessed Virgin. This gave me great courage and I found nothing difficult, even though I feared illusions. This made me believe that if this was of God, I did not have to make any preparations for it; consequently, I did not bring a penny for the voyage.

Two natural characteristics of the young woman are evident here: absolute trust in Mary and a decision to adopt the way of poverty. In this she shared the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." (Jn:14:23)

Many stories have been told about Marguerite's travels and adventures. Her decision to travel without funds led to her being

refused lodging in France. It also put her in some difficult situations when others paid for her. She had to barricade her door and chase away drunken companions.

On the ship, we are told she refused to eat at the captain's table and that she slept on deck on a coil of rope. From these ascetic decisions, we can see a certain toughness and determination in this, a young woman from a bourgeois family of France.

Arriving in Montreal, Marguerite discovered that she could not teach because no children had lived long enough to reach school age. In addition, the city was continuously under siege from the Iroquois. Marguerite described the situation as follows:

Nicolas Godé, Jean de Saint-Pere and a servant were killed while they were roofing their house at Point St. Charles. . . .

There were about a dozen men who were working on the lands belonging to Levigne; they were carried off with the exception of three who were killed on the spot. . . .

M. Brisar assembled 17 or 18 of the most generous men to go to war and to attack the Indians; they were ready to give up their lives if it was God's will. But they were betrayed and all were killed with various kinds of suffering. . . .

While M. de Maisonneuve was in France the first time, two hundred Iroquois attacked Montreal and were entrenched in a ditch which runs down from our garden and crosses the Rue St. Paul. At that time there was no one there. . . .

In the midst of this frightening situation, Marguerite could well have recited today's psalm: "The Lord is worthy of all praise; when I call I am saved from my foes." (Ps. 17)

In this situation we begin to see a new characteristic of flexibility, the sure sign of grace, entering into Marguerite's rather hard and ascetic nature. Since she could not teach, she found other tasks to do. She led a contingent of men to the top of the Mountain to replace the cross which had been knocked down; the original cross had been erected to commemorate the saving of the lower city from a flood.

Next, Maguerite turned her energies to building a chapel, Notre Dame de Bonsecours, quite amazingly she built this without any capital. She tells us, "I urged a few people who were there to gather stone. I used to do sewing in payment, I would ask for a day's work. I collected alms to pay for the mason's work. M. de Maisonneuve had the necessary timber squared. Others prepared the lime, the sand, and the boards and soon I had found enough to build it and roof it."

Eventually, Marguerite Bourgeoys began to establish her schools. We know that she insisted that the schooling be free and available to all children, regardless of race or class. The mature fruit of her vocation is embodied in today's Gospel message: "You must love your neighbour as yourself." (Jn 14:23)

Marguerite tells us:

Teaching is the work most suited to draw down the graces of God if it is done with purity of intention, without distinction between the poor and the rich, between relatives and friends and strangers, between the pretty and the ugly, the gentle and the grumblers

For the rest of her life, Marguerite put this belief into practice by establishing schools where girls could learn to read and

write, develop technical skills, and even prepare for marriage or a religious vocation. Teaching was Marguerite's specific gift of the Spirit which St. Paul mentioned in today's letter to the Corinthians.

Marguerite Bourgeoys had to fight hard with Church authorities to maintain her vision of free schools taught by uncloistered women. Struggling to defend her community from being assimilated into the cloistered Ursulines, she argued: "The Blessed Virgin was never cloistered She never excused herself from any journey on which there was good to be done or some work of charity to be performed. We wish to follow her."

If we were able to end our reflections on the sanctity of Marguerite Bourgeoys here, we would have been able to say that she accomplished what was asked of her, she fulfilled her call from Christ.

However, the call to sanctity included one further deepening, one further refinement, so that Marguerite Bourgeoys could be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ. She suffered deeply in her final years; indeed, she passed through a crucifixion of everything she loved.

Marguerite Bourgeoys realized that her sisters were beginning to turn away from the basic precept of poverty which she had so willingly embraced in France. She began to criticize them for seeking to be more comfortable than the settlers, for wanting to eat white bread while others ate only dark bread, for wanting to sleep on linen sheets while others had only blankets.

Then, when the convent burned down, Marguerite wrote: "I believe

she became a saint, in the final instance not so much by her natural adventurousness, nor by her asceticism, nor even by her capacity as an organizer and teacher. Instead Marguerite Bourgeoys became a saint because she allowed herself to be made into the image of Christ, to be made humble and flexible in the face of the world's challenges, and to persist in turning to the Lord unto the end. She therefore lived out in her body the words of today's joyful communion song:

Lord, you will show me the path of life and fill
me with joy in your presence. (Ps. 15:11)

Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, pray for us!

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